

Emirati cuisine scene

With so many variations of Arabic food in the region and only a few Emirati chefs in the UAE, *BBC Good Food Middle East* caught up with Chef Musabbeh Tarish from Kempinski Hotel Mall of the Emirates to discover what makes Emirati cuisine so unique.



Aspen restaurant, Kempinski Hotel Mall of the Emirates

The story of Emirati cuisine is one that is passed down from generation to generation and shared among family and friends within the homes of UAE nationals. Musabbeh Tarish, the recently appointed head chef at Aspen restaurant Kempinski Hotel Mall of the Emirates, says he grew up surrounded by food and cooking; "I learnt to cook from my mother and I would often cook with my sisters in the kitchen at home. I have always had a love for food and cooking. I always knew I wanted to be chef".

Up until recently, Emirati recipe books have not been readily available, so visitors to the UAE

seeking traditional and authentic Emirati cuisine could only experience it through the few chefs that are working in the region. Tarish believes that while many people have tried and enjoyed Arabic food in the UAE; it is often Lebanese or Iranian food that they have tasted, rather than true Emirati cuisine. Dishes like the shawarma, hummous, tabbouleh and mixed grill are all recent additions to the Emirati region and "do not do justice to the 'soul food' that makes up the Emirati menu", he says.

The true taste difference of Emirati dishes lies in the preparation as well as in the fresh, locally-

grown herbs used. The food is usually cooked in one pot and saffron, cardamom, turmeric and thyme are the core flavours that are infused into Emirati cooking. "An Emirati will know true Emirati food at the first taste", says Tarish, "and I'd like more people in UAE and around the world to experience these flavours".

Tarish has been celebrated around the Middle East as a master of Emirati cuisine and has attracted royal families from Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East to sample his food. While he is now revered throughout the UAE and has a supportive network of family and

friends, Tarish says that wasn't always the case.

"When I first told my family I wanted to be a chef, they laughed and said the kitchen was a woman's place. It was very difficult at first, however, now my friends and family are so proud of me and my success," says Tarish with a smile.

Times and attitudes towards Arabic men in the kitchen are slowly changing, and with each achievement Tarish proves critics wrong and makes the path that much easier for other passionate UAE-born culinary masters. Tarish is a recipient of the Emirates Culinary Guild award and this year saw him present a cooking demonstration at Taste of Dubai, making him the first Emirati chef to be a part of the food festival.

Not only a moment of great personal exposure for Tarish, Taste of Dubai allowed him the opportunity to showcase Emirati cuisine to a wide, multi-national audience and appear on the same stage as global chef stars like Gordon Ramsay. Tarish demonstrated his speciality; Emirati grilled lamb and prawns in a cucumber labneh, to the Taste of Dubai crowd. "It was difficult for me to talk into the microphone in front of all these people while cooking my dish, but in the end I communicated through the food and everybody loved it," Tarish enthuses.

Describing his food as Emirati cuisine with a modern twist, Tarish says he is inspired by the cuisine that originates from this region, but he is also influenced by contemporary trends and different cultures and styles of cooking. "In Dubai, I have worked with chefs from all over the world; from Germany, from Japan. I keep learning from these international chefs along the way and I create a unique style within my own cooking".

Emirati cuisine traditionally consists of just one main meal, explains Tarish, however he has developed a more international style and created a series of Emirati dishes that can be served in three courses. Tarish takes the core qualities of Emirati food and infuses the dishes with an international, contemporary feel. Another example is the Lamb Moussaka, a very conventional dish from the region that has been given a 'Tarish twist' through the addition of a béchamel sauce made from camel's milk.

Emirati cuisine can almost be described as a fusion of Middle Eastern and Asian food and one of Tarish's latest signature dishes, the succulent tiger prawns with aromatic tomato rice as well as the beef sirloin served with babaganoush celebrates this combination.

While trying to corner him into telling us the secret to cooking up an Emirati cuisine success, he laughs warmly and says that a chef doesn't tell his secrets, but reveals; "I pick all my own herbs from the mountains in Hatta. That is where the flavour comes from and you can't find these herbs anywhere else".



Chef Musabbeh's Emirati grilled lamb and prawn 'panini' with cucumber labneh

A featured recipe at Aspen at Kempinski Hotel Mall of the Emirates

SERVES 2

Ingredients:

20g sweet potato
2 pieces Iranian Bread (Saaj)
10g Harissa paste
10g garlic puree
1 packet onion shallots
2 cucumbers
30g labneh
2 sprigs of fresh mint
1 iceberg lettuce
5 tomatoes
1 sprig of rosemary
10 large prawns
Salt and pepper to taste

Method:

- 1 Peel the sweet potatoes and put them into boiling water to cook until they are soft. Once cooked, strain the water off and let them dry on an aerated rack. After the potatoes have dried off for about five minutes mash them with a potato press, making sure to eliminate all lumps.
- 2 Place the cream and butter into a pot and bring to boil. Season the cream with salt pepper and a little nutmeg. Mix the cream-butter mix in with the mashed potatoes and add seasoning to taste.
- 3 Dice the trimmed lamb loin into 1 x 1 cm-sized cubes, sear the prawns and lamb and season with salt, pepper and chopped garlic. Roll out the saaj and spread the potato mash, harissa and

garlic paste onto the bread. Add the sliced iceberg lettuce, tomatoes and shallots. Place the lamb and prawns on top of the salad and roll the saaj up like wrap, grill it on a Panini grill until hot and crispy and serve hot with labneh dip.

FOR THE HARISSA PASTE:

Use a pestle and mortar for processing the red pepper, chillies, deseeded tomatoes, fresh mint and salt, and grind until it is a smooth puree. Add olive oil to the mixture to create a creamy texture, and season with salt, pepper and lemon juice to taste.

FOR THE GARLIC PUREE:

First blanch the garlic in milk to take away the sharpness, and then rinse the garlic in ice water. Follow by pureeing the blanched garlic with half of the olive oil in a tabletop blender and then emulsify the garlic puree with a few ice cubes until you get a smooth and creamy white puree.

FOR THE LABNEH DIP:

Mix the labneh with grated cucumber and some chopped mint leaves and season with salt, pepper, lemon juice, sugar and a little garlic.

Once the pastes and dips are complete:

- 1 Marinate the lamb and prawns in Harissa paste and grill slowly. Finish it off with a charcoal grill.
- 2 Open up the Iranian flat bread and brush with garlic paste and place the sweet potato and the lamb and prawns into the bread.
- 3 Mix the lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers and shallot rings in labneh and season.
- 4 Place the salad ingredients into the flat bread and wrap up like a shwarma.